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Building confidence and community

Immigrants in Charlotte tell their experiences in Storyology.

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By Michael J. Solender
Special Correspondent
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Kali Ferguson, left, and Lori Fernald Khamala will share their experiences in Storyology. COURTESY AFSC -

More Information

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Storyology participants will talk about their experiences at 11 a.m. Thursday at Sensoria, the arts and literary festival in Tate Hall at Central Piedmont Community College. Admission is free.

For information, go to: sensoria.cpcc.edu/event/114/

Kali Ferguson, CommuniCulture: www.kaliferguson.com

Storyology films on YouTube: www.youtube.com/

view_play_list?p=

E085E2DF04ADFB63.

Whether a folktale or a personal account of a life-changing journey, stories are how we know what it means to be human, says Charlotte resident, cultural educator and teaching artist Kali Ferguson.

Ferguson recently served as a facilitator for Storyology, a digital storytelling project for area immigrants sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee.

AFSC is an international nonprofit organization committed to social justice, peace and humanitarian service.

Together with AFSC's Area Office of the Carolinas, Ferguson worked with N.C. Immigrant Rights Program Director Lori Fernald Khamala to develop a pilot program for Charlotte-area immigrants.

Through Storyology: Digital Storytelling by Immigrants and Refugees, AFSC taught digital literacy skills to the participants, making immigrant stories available for the public. The organization also built a community of many cultures within the program.

Each participant produced a two- to four-minute digital story. They narrated their journey and added background music and images (sometimes photographs taken themselves).

Ferguson, Khamala and other program participants will share their experience Thursday at Sensoria, the arts and literary festival at Central Piedmont Community College.

Ferguson and Khamala are childhood friends, each following a professional path that included sharing the voices of others who often are not well represented or easily heard.

Ferguson is bilingual and has a background in Spanish education. She has taught in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools and also served as a teaching artist with Wolf Trap Education and the Blumenthal Education Institute.

She has a storytelling-based business, CommuniCulture, where she incorporates songs, stories, poetry and dance in Spanish and English, targeting children and youngsters.

"So much of the modern mythology of minority voices are informed by the media or popular culture and don't accurately represent those who are from different backgrounds we may encounter in our day-to-day lives," said Ferguson. "I work to share the stories and better reflect the humanity of real people who are our neighbors."

Khamala has a background in immigrant rights and advocacy. She said the overarching goal of Storyology is to lift the voices of immigrants in the community and help change the dynamic of the rhetoric that she sees shaped mostly by others.

"It is vital that people recognize that often we don't hear from the immigrants themselves in the debate surrounding their status," said Khamala.

"Through vehicles like this program, the public can see the dignity of these new members of our community and the rich diversity they bring to the fabric of our neighborhoods."

The program brought together a diverse group of immigrant students, each with their own partner-volunteer, resource personnel and other helpers to produce a class on digital storytelling.

The class occurred over two weekends and one additional evening at the Latin American Coalition. The class included writing and audio- and video-editing workshops and emphasized community-building features like sharing of cultural objects and immigration journey maps.

After completing an application process and being vetted by AFSC, seven Charlotte-area immigrants were selected for the inaugural program.

The countries represented included: Bhutan, Haiti, Kenya, Mexico and Vietnam.

Participant ages ranged from 16 to about 40.

According to Ferguson, the program has three distinct objectives.

"Our first objective is building community," she said. "Each immigrant is paired with a volunteer and member of our community, and in our initial get-together we focus on cultural sharing and hear everyone's experience in entering a new community. Participants were asked to bring an object from their culture and talk about it.

"Through this cross-cultural sharing, some strong bonds began to be established. The participants also learned that they are not alone in their journey and there are others who have shared experience and can be resources for them."

The second objective of the program is skill-building, Ferguson said.

"Through the process of making their individual films, each participant learned valuable computer skills, audio/visual editing, and writing, storytelling and communication skills. It is a great confidence-booster for our participants."

The third objective of the program is to create and share actual stories with community leaders, policy-makers and the public about the very real and personal journeys that immigrants have.

"We want to have participants show the diversity of the immigrant experience and have people connect with others in the community who might not otherwise understand the challenges they face," said Ferguson.

Sabine Guerrier is originally from Haiti. She relocated to Charlotte in 2003 after first coming to the United States many years earlier and settling in New York.

"After visiting my sister here in the Charlotte, I simply fell in love with the city," said Guerrier, founder of Charlotte's nonprofit Haitian Heritage and Friends of Haiti support organization. She estimates Charlotte's Haitian population is more than 2,000 people.

Guerrier is a longtime advocate for Haitian immigrants and has been particularly active since the devastating earthquake of 2010 hit the region.

"I am always looking for ways to help my people and help tell their stories, said Guerrier. She discovered the Storyology program through Ferguson and was excited to participate.

Ferguson said she gained much from the program, too.

"It was incredibly empowering," said Ferguson, "to watch people who initially thought their stories didn't matter and then see them blossom as their creations connected deeply with their peers and others. It was an amazing alchemy.

"Sharing stories is how we order our minds, hearts and lives. We must be conscious of the stories we believe, listen to and tell."

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